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SUBJECT: CONCERNS ABOUT JALOZAI REFUGEE CAMP CLOSING

REF: ISLAMABAD 3276

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson, reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In separate meetings, Ambassador and DCM raised with Interior Minister Sherpao our concern that the GOP's decision to close the Jalozai refugee camp by August 31 would create a political and humanitarian crisis. Sherpao confirmed receiving similar demarches from Afghanistan and UNCHR. He said that the GOP would stop repatriation for Ramadan and likely would wait until March 2008 to resume repatriations. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The Jalozai refugee camp is located 35 km southwest of Peshawar and is one of the largest refugee camps in Pakistan. The camp has 109,000 residents and resembles a large rural village, with free-standing homes and many shops. Pursuant to an agreement between the GOA, the GOP, and the UNHCR the Jalozai refugee camp was scheduled for closure by 31 August 2007. The camp residents were informed of the impending closure in February 2007; however, the GOP did not take any steps to close the camp until a few days ago.

¶3. (C) In anticipation of the 31 August deadline, the GOP surrounded the camp with 700 Frontier Constabulary forces. The security forces have not entered the camp but have asked all shop owners and residents to evacuate the building in preparation for demolition. They have destroyed some lumber shops and other non-essential buildings. There is panic in the camp as most residents have made no preparations for either moving or for the impending demolition. To date, only around 10,000 individuals have been repatriated by the UNHCR. The UNHCR and the GOP estimate that only a few thousand more refugees can be repatriated before the start of Ramadan (early September).

¶4. (SBU) The UNHCR is anticipating a humanitarian crisis if all the refugees are forced to repatriate within the allotted time. None of the parties involved has the capacity to process all of the refugees and safely resettle them in Afghanistan within 10 days. With the onset of Ramadan and winter in Afghanistan, the refugees will not be able to resettle properly. These displaced people will either remain in Pakistan illegally or live in make-shift housing on the other side of the border. In the worst case scenario, if the GOP continues to pressure the refugees, the UNHCR will have to abandon the camp for security reasons.

¶5. (C) The UNHCR has been urging the GOP at various levels and also seeking the GOA's leverage in asking the GOP to reach an agreement with the tribal leaders in the Jalozei camp to evacuate in March 2008, as soon as repatriation season reopens. The GOP's current pressure has made it clear to the tribal leaders that the camp has to be closed.

¶6. (C) DCM delivered a demarche to Interior Minister Aftab Sherpao on 25 August urging him to stop the evacuation until March 2008. The Ambassador followed up with Sherpao on 30 August. Minister Sherpao told the Ambassador that 3,000-4,000 more refugees were expected to leave before the beginning of Ramadan (o/a September 12) and that repatriation would be suspended for Ramadan. Sherpao was considering UNHCR's request to delay the closure; he had received a similar request from GOA officials who reported that Afghanistan was not prepared to receive all the Jalozei refugees. Sherpao said that the GOP will probably delay further repatriation until the recommended March 2008 date and then make sure that the Jalozei refugees are the first to be repatriated.

¶7. (C) Comment: Averting this forced and sudden repatriation is a positive sign of improved bilateral relations. However, Pakistan remains eager to close the three remaining Afghan refugee camps as soon as possible. End Comment.
PATTERSON